

INFLUENZA

What is influenza?

Influenza is caused by a virus infection of the respiratory tract. Its name is commonly shortened and called "the flu." Influenza is a more severe illness than most other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold. Typical symptoms include fever (usually 100°F to 103°F in adults and often higher in children) and respiratory symptoms, such as cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, as well as headache, muscle aches, and often, extreme fatigue. Although nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can sometimes accompany influenza infection, especially in children, gastrointestinal symptoms are not common. What we call "stomach flu" is not influenza.

Most people who get the flu recover completely in one to two weeks, but some people develop serious and potentially life-threatening complications, such as pneumonia. Flu-related complications can occur at any age. The elderly and people with chronic health problems are much more likely to develop serious complications than are younger, healthier people.

What are influenza viruses and how do they work?

Influenza viruses continually change over time. This constant changing enables the virus to overcome a person's immune system. That means that people can get the flu throughout their life. Influenza types A and B are responsible for many respiratory illnesses that occur almost every winter. Both types cause the same kind of illness.

What is the natural history of influenza?

The continual change (or mutation) of the influenza viruses is the reason that there are differences from one influenza season to another and the reason that influenza vaccine must be updated every year. A major change in the viruses occurs only occasionally. When it does occur, large numbers of people, and sometimes the entire population, have no antibody protection against the virus. This may result in a worldwide epidemic. During the last century, this happened in 1918, 1957, and 1968, each of which resulted in large numbers of deaths.

Can influenza be prevented or treated?

Yes. Influenza vaccine can prevent or lessen the effect of influenza. Annual immunization is recommended for all persons 65 years of age or older or persons of any age who have a chronic disorder, particularly heart or lung conditions. In addition, there are oral or inhaled drugs, prescribed by physicians, to treat the disease; some of these can also be used to prevent influenza in exposed individuals before immunization can take effect.

Where can I find more information on influenza?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has information available at their website
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/flu/fluvirus.htm>.